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**M.A. Thesis In** English Language and Literature  
**Power Struggle in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross***  
**and *Oleanna***

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# **In the Name Of God**

## **Declaration**

I—Somayeh Tavanaei (860133)—a student of English Language and Literature at the faculty of Literature and Humanities, hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own research, and that I have provided exact references wherever I have quoted someone. I also declare that the topic of my research is an original one and has not been worked upon before. I hereby promise not to publish the findings of this research and not to make it accessible to others without the permission of Shiraz University. Shiraz University holds the copyright on this research.

# **To My Mom**

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**ABSTRACT**  
**POWER STRUGGLE IN MAMET'S *GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS***  
**AND *OLEANNA***

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This study probes into the nature of characters' struggle for power in two of Mamet's most important plays, *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Oleanna*. In different genres in which Mamet is active, he explores the destructive effects of the American dream, and in that sense he is the inheritor of a basic theme of American literature. In order to highlight the absence of genuine human relationship in the competitive American society, Mamet depicts human selfishness and desire for supremacy in its most ruthless form, therefore a historical reading of plays under discussion is necessitated. By centering on characters' struggle for superiority, the key role of language is under detailed scrutiny.

This study consists of five chapters: the first chapter is introductory and sketches out Mamet's position in modern American drama; the second chapter focuses on Mamet's biography and the impact of his historical moment on his writing as well as the theoretical framework of the study which is an eclectic one; the third chapter is devoted to the examination of power struggle between the real estate salesmen of *Glengarry Glen Ross* with a focus on J. L. Austin's account of performatives. The fourth chapter applies Foucault's discussion of power to master-disciple relationship in *Oleanna*, and the last chapter is the conclusion to all the

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# CHAPTER I

## Introduction

Susan Harris Smith in her book *American Drama: The Bastard Art* (1997) referring to the bad reputation American drama has suffered from for so long says, “For too many critics and historians American drama is still American Literature’s unwanted bastard child, the offspring of the whore that is American theater” (Cited in Krasner, 2005:1). This may be due to the fact that in the first century after the American independence no unique American play was written. However today this conception of the American drama has changed to the extent that it is far from the “bastard child” of American theatre and has already established its place as the representative of American art and culture.

The dramatic art of every nation inevitably reflects its national identity. As Martin Esslin writes in his *An Anatomy of Drama*, “The theatre is the place where a nation thinks in public in front of itself” (1976: 101). Thus, modern American drama as the dramatic art of a newly born nation reflects, on the one hand, the trials and tribulations and on the other hand, the hopes and dreams of its people through different stages of its development and can be viewed as a continuous exploration of the American national identity in epistemological and ontological terms. The continuous treatment of several themes related to American national identity— themes like social justice, the complexities of war and the meaning of patriotism, the negotiation of individual human rights and the notion of social responsibility— links playwrights as different in their manner of presentations as O’Neill and Mamet.



Although there could be no clear-cut distinction between different stages of the development of the American drama, for the sake of convenience in our discussion four distinct stages are suggested here. The first period covers the colonial period till the outbreak of the WWI, which with the notable exception of *The Contrast* by Royall Tyler produced no genuine American play.

It was just before the First World War that the American drama came suddenly to life. This second period could be labeled as the realistic period of American literature, during which American dramatists brought American theatre in from the frontier where it had waited too long and gave it a new position as a highly respected art form. Since the First World War, American drama has achieved the universal and lasting appeal that is characteristic of enduring literature. During this period we have the towering presence of Eugene O'Neill who in 1936 became the only twentieth-century American dramatist awarded the Noble Prize in literature. He firmly established American dramatic realism by probing in a richness of detail "the American dream, race relations, class conflicts, sexuality, human aspirations, disappointment, alienation, psychoanalysis, and the American family" (Krasner, 2005:143).

However, by the late 1950s and 1960s a more unrealistic drama started to emerge. For the generations that lived through the devastating effects of two world wars, uncertainty and alienation became the conditions of human existence. During this period European and British playwrights such as Jean Genet, Samuel Becket, Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter introduced a style of theatre that dealt with the anxieties of living in a postwar society. Thus, modernization of American drama was part of a broader wave of cultural modernism.

This new unrealistic drama took on the job of questioning the traditional approaches to the nature of reality in order to “reveal the gaps in such limited constructions of identity and Truth” (Saddik , 2007:2). In order to avoid the reproduction of the surface reality, the so called modernist playwrights tried to distort the stage settings and the language used by characters that unlike those of the realistic drama of the past did not manifest a psychologically consistent identity. As Saddik (2007) points out:

European theatre practitioners in the twentieth century, such as Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, would offer political, ideological and structural challenges to Aristotle, opening the doors for a dynamic theatre that would ask audiences to engage with difficult existential, epistemological and ontological questions...to inspire thoughtful considerations of who we are and how we fit into our various communities. (4)

The mid -1970s could be marked as the beginning of the fourth stage of the development of American drama, which is postmodernism. No clear distinction could be drawn between the traits that make a play a modernist or a postmodernist one. However as Saddik (2007) believes:

The modernists were still searching for absolutes, the codes of a fixed and immutable reality that would give order and meaning to the world through concepts such as ‘human nature’ and a unifying religious or spiritual sensibility. After the violence and atrocities of the Second World War, however, the fragile foundations of meaning and truth were shaken even further. As a result, a more fragmented and

dislocated individual emerged to usher in what became known as postmodernity: a historical phase where there were no certainties, no origins and no absolute position from which one could safely view the world.(6)

David Mamet (born November 30, 1947) the American playwright, screenwriter, director, and essayist cannot be comfortably placed in one or the other of the above categories. He has (especially in his earlier works) many of the characteristics of modernist theatre, but postmodernist traits (fragmented individual, the indeterminacy of reality, no absolute position from which we could view the world, self-conscious performance of identity, and endings open to many interpretations) can also be traced in some of his works.

Mamet's subject is America and its mythic dream, and for the exploration of American national identity he has taken the multiple media of its culture. In different genres in which he is active, he explores the destructive effects of the American dream. In that sense Mamet is the inheritor of a basic theme of American literature.

His plays are basically about loss, specifically loss of genuine human relationship. What the theatre scholar C. W. E. Bigsby says of *American Buffalo*, "it is a play about failed relationships, about the gap between people whose need for contact is as real as their evasion of it" (*Modern American Drama*, 2004: 215) is almost true of all Mamet's plays. He constantly offers images of alienation, moral disintegration and spiritual decay, thus talking about the absence of things to suggest human need for them. Bigsby talking about Mamet's suggested aim of

theatre remarks, “The logic of theatre, he suggests, should be that of the dream, addressing anxieties and needs which the rational mind sublimates” (ibid: 207).

In a sense *House of Games*, the first film that Mamet directed, stands as a paradigm of his plays in that a group of confidence tricksters conspire to rob a woman of her money, by misusing her trust, a basic human need which is used as a weapon to ensnare her. Similarly in almost all of his plays, “Mamet presents us with characters who turn moral virtues into vulnerabilities, justify criminality in terms of business, generate plots and perform roles with consummate skill, trade friendship into advantage and generate a language out of phase with experience” (ibid: 201). Almost all of Mamet characters are engaged in con-games, a method of survival Mamet himself mastered in early youth. As Ira Nadel (2008) in his critical biography of Mamet explains, being brought up in a dysfunctional family “The con was often his only means of survival against the intimidation and threats his parents posed” (4).

Thus, Mamet’s characters are engaged in deception, even when it seems otherwise as briefly in *Speed the Plow* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, in retrospect it proves illusory. Quite ironically in Mamet, exploitation of others does not go along with denial of basic human needs, but in contrary, Mamet cons are very perceptive of these needs and it is exactly their knowledge of gaps in human relationship which makes their victims vulnerable to their deceit. According to Bigsby, Mamet’s characters are “the new priests of a post-industrial society, selling reassurance, forgiveness and grace to those in terror of an empty universe or an empty life” (*Modern American Drama*, 2004:202).

Mamet began writing in 1970s, the so called American 'me-decade'. Historians believe that seeds of each decade's air lie in that of the previous one even if it is in terms of reaction. Correspondingly, if Kennedy's era is an age of commitment, that of Reagan is an age of "retreat from the commitments...in which self-interest was elevated as a value". (Biggsby, *The Cambridge Companion To David Mamet*, 2004: 26). The military struggle fought in Vietnam from 1959 to 1975 had maimed many Americans spiritually so that the age of political idealism was at its end. Mamet's age is one of spiritual aridity and emotional bankruptcy, and he is the product of his era in that he attempts "to breathe life into American values, by exposing the extent to which they had been betrayed and subverted" (Biggsby, *Modern American Drama*, 2004: 203)

Thus, though Mamet is not a didactic writer, he is something of a civic teacher. In his clearest statement on the purpose of theatre Mamet explains:

In a morally bankrupt time we can help to change the habit of coercive and frightened action and substitute for it the habit of trust, of self-reliance, and co-operation. If we are true to our ideals we can help form an ideal society- not by preaching about it, but by creating it each night in front of the audience- by showing how it works. In action.

(Cited in *The Cambridge companion To David Mamet*, 2004: 34 )

In his errand to create an ideal society, the body of his plays (especially his earlier works) could be viewed as a critique of the superficiality of American capitalism, which has substituted the material for the spiritual. Set in a "milieu of capitalism" (Biggsby, *Modern American Drama*, 2004: 211) what Ruby Cohn terms his business trilogy—*American Buffalo*, *Glengarry Glenn Ross* and *Speed the Plow*—

criticize the greed of post-industrial American society, which according to Bigsby “breeds resentment and provokes criminality; but the point is that, morally speaking, the criminality is seen by Mamet as implicit in capitalism” (*Modern American Drama*, 2004:203). In his plays, the sensitive and the weak are destroyed because of capitalism’s ruthless obsession with materialistic gain at the expense of deeper spiritual values. He also depicts the glorification of the individual as opposed to the collective as a result of capitalism and in direct conflict with the essence of the Dream.

Therefore, Mamet’s characters’ failure to understand one another is not the product of deterministic environment, fate or genetics as some critics have pointed out. They fail because they have generated their identities through taking as real and substantial what in fact is only myth gone awry and degraded into fantasy.

Mamet’s characters display a desperate need to connect, but they seem to have forgotten how to do so. His characters’ yearning to connect and to belong to a community could also be linked to a major aspect of his own character: that of his Jewishness. Although until recently he was not much interested in his Jewish faith, still as a Jewish writer he has been brought up by a sense of denial of his roots. As Bigsby writes about the imprint of Mamet’s Jewish background in his works, “the collapse of values that he documented, the sense of dislocation, abandonment, self-deceit which defined his characters, might have a correlative in his own experience” (*The Cambridge Companion To David Mamet*, 2004:9). His characters’ wish to belong to a community, however illusory, is also related to his sense of deracination. Thus, his concerns are epistemological as well as sociological.

The inability of his characters to connect is specifically reflected in the scatological language that they use. Central to our discussion here is what Nadel terms “Mamet’s love affair with language” (2008:8). Like Pinter, “Mamet's dialogue is fragmented, its syntax broken. His characters often converse in incomplete sentences, substitute nonsense words, find language draining away in the face of experience” (Biggsby, *Modern American Drama*, 2004: 215). Yet, his dialogue is so unique that it came to be known as Mametspeak. As illustrated before, content is not an issue in Mamet. He has nothing new to say. What he says has been said before. It is the way he says it which is new and appealing.

Zinman (1992), for whom Mamet is “the magician of macho, the wizard of obscenity” (208), believes that Mametspeak with its desire to conceal rather than reveal, seems to be a variation of Jewish aporia, “the trope of doubt, the real or pretended inability to know what the subject under discussion is” (209). As he appositely points out aporia, which he defines as “the lack of a clear subject, and the loss of specific nouns” (ibid), control play after play. He argues that Mamet as a second-generation Jew had no language because his parents “eschewed Yiddish as the slave language of poverty and Hebrew as the dead language of meaningless ritual” (215). Therefore Mamet’s diarrheic dialogue reveals that void:

Jewish aporia demonstrates the loss, not only of the subject and its meaning, but the loss of a language with which to articulate that loss....All that is left for Mamet is a rhythm of speech to give Nothing shape and sound.(215)

In fact, the emotional and psychological gaps in characters are translated into linguistic incompletions. The way he constructs his dialogue— the use of monosyllabic words, short sentences, and simple questions— is indicative of the characters’ inability to sustain thought. Besides, Mamet’s language is in part the outcome of his admiration for minimalistic aesthetic in both writing and acting. He believes that leaving out is more valuable than putting in. In *On Directing Film* he asks a question the answer to which is central to his aesthetic: “How much can one remove and still have the composition be intelligible?” and here is the answer: “Chekov removed the plot. Pinter, elaborating, removed the history, the narration; Beckett, the characterization, we hear it anyway” (1991:15), and for him the ability to make it heard ‘anyway’ is what makes a good writer. In his parsimonious attitude towards words, Mamet believes that Hemingway had the key: “Tell the story, take out the good lines, and see if it still works” (1996:90), which he found the best advice about writing.

Thus similar to Pinter, silence in his works—as a corollary to his minimalistic aesthetic— is replete with meaning. To Mamet omission is a form of creation, and he is one of the fewest playwrights who take the fullest advantage out of this paradoxical tension. As Bigsby regarding the power of omission points out:

It is in part the evasive nature of language, its power to dazzle and disorient, and, behind that, of thought, mysterious, able to evade even self interrogation, which provides that Darwinian drive to continue. It is the gap between appearance and reality which provides the energy that fuels the journey. (*The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, 2004: 38)



This minimalistic aesthetics duplicates his principles of acting. What Mamet demands is clarity and straightforwardness. The writing itself is clear, even at the expense of the essential. He prefers action to thought and tends to leave the interpretation to the audience: “Be strong, direct and brave, do not be introspective,” is his usual tip to the cast of his plays: “continue to create rather than interpret” (Cited in Nadel, 2008:28).

Stage directions are also excluded as non-essential to good drama. Nadel, the most informed of his biographers, considers this tendency to self-assuredness and straightforwardness as a corollary of Mamet’s environment: “Mamet partly learned his self-assuredness in Chicago, the embodiment of industry and aggression, work and crime.... The neighborhoods, voices, and styles of Chicago run through Mamet’s work as deeply as does London for Dickens or Dublin for Joyce” (2008:3-4).

Another linguistic strategy that puts Mamet in the tradition of Pinter is that his characters are the victims of the language they speak. Like Pinter his characters are under the constant fear of being trapped by their own words, so similar to Pinter “The rush of language in his plays...is an evasion of a silence which they fear for the knowledge it might bring, a knowledge of vulnerability, of needs they forbear to confront” (Biggsby, *The Cambridge Companion To David Mamet*, 2004: 21).

Another function of Mamet’s language is its significant role in the struggle for superiority in his plays. Competition is a major theme in Mamet. As Nadel writes, “Mamet’s world is cut-throat, whether among actors, thieves, or salesman. They battle each other to get on the top and undermine each other to survive” (2008:1).

This process of seeking supremacy over others could especially be traced in two of his plays. *Glengarry Glen Ross*, opened in London in 1983 and *Oleanna* premiered in 1992 in Cambridge, Massachusetts can be viewed as full-fledged embodiments of power struggle but each one in its own distinct way. Regarding the fact that nearly ten years separate the first production of the two plays, this study aims at examining the tools and strategies through which the characters in these two plays exert power over each other.

In *Glengarry* Mamet is obviously “responding to the economic and social ruthlessness of Reaganism” (Nightingale, 2004: 90). In the competitive society which Mamet portrays the salesmen of the play are both representatives and victims of the capitalistic system. In the examination of this “Darwinian mix of unscrupulous competitiveness and greed” (ibid: 91) the influence of Pinter’s tradition in using language as a source of menace on Mamet’s dialogue is stressed.

The background of *Oleanna*, on the other hand, is far from the cut-throat world of the real-estate salesmen. Yet, in this postmodern play set in an unnamed campus the two characters are constantly struggling for supremacy over each other. Many critics, Ryan (1996) for instance, believe that Mamet’s depiction of power struggle in *Oleanna* is much more artistic than his earlier works in that during the entire first act neither Carol nor John appear to talk about power, and it is only in retrospection that the audience understand the implications of characters’ conversation during the first act.

## **The Significance of the Study**

Mamet is the most quintessential of all American playwrights. His subject is American mythic dream and his form the multiple media of its culture. In Mamet the dynamic of individualistic attitude which is a result of capitalism is in conflict with the essence of the 'Dream', yet for him if there is a possibility for redemption, it is in drama. In Mamet something essential to human, which is the genuine human relationship, is lost. So in order to herald its absence and the need for its restoration, he depicts human selfishness and desire for supremacy in its most ruthless form. The significance of this study would be in detailed scrutinizing of the nature of struggle in two of his major plays, *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Oleanna*. Since nearly ten years separates the production of the two plays, the present study also seeks to shed light on the development of Mamet's depiction of power struggle which has not been attempted before.

## **The Objective of the Study**

This study probes into the nature of characters' struggle for power in two of Mamet's most important plays, *Glengarry glen Ross* and *Oleanna*. In studying the former, revealing the competitive nature of the American society of the time is aimed at. In the detailed examination of the relationship between characters – especially in *Oleanna*-- in terms of struggling to overpower each other, the role of language would be under scrutiny and the influence of Pinter's use of language as a menacing factor will be discussed. The development of Mamet's depiction of power struggle -especially regarding his inclusion of a pedagogical relationship in *Oleanna*- will be also under discussion.

## **Methodology**

This study is a library research in which the two plays of Mamet are analyzed using Foucault's ideas as well as other approaches when necessary. This study is covered in five chapters. Chapter I consists of introduction, literature review, the object and significance of the study and the organization of the study. Chapter II focuses on Mamet's biography and the impact of his historical moment on his writing as well as the theoretical framework of the study which is an eclectic one. In the discussion of the struggle for superiority between the salesmen of *Glengarry* we have a historical examination of the spirit of the age. In exploring the role of language in *Glengarry*, Mamet is discussed as an inheritor of Pinter's frequent use of language as a weapon for entrapment. In the probing of the relationship between power and language and also the exercise of power in structured systems Foucault's discussion of power is employed. Chapter III examines the strategies used by the salesmen of *Glengarry* in order to empower each other. Mamet's critique of capitalism and the menacing nature of the language are also discussed in detail. Chapter IV is a discussion of power struggle in *Oleanna*. The power struggle between a male professor who has a superior ability in using language, and a female student who is --at least at the beginning-- in an inferior position in using language in the play is discussed in two basic levels of the relationship between language and power, and also the exercise of power in master-disciple relationship. Finally, chapter V is a summary of the previous chapters. In conclusion, this study attempts to analyze the depiction of power in two of Mamet's important plays and also follow the development of Mamet's depiction of